

Sexually transmitted diseases increase 4 percent in 2004; Chlamydia cases show greatest increase

New data released by the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) shows that reported sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in Minnesota rose another 4 percent in 2004, following a 6 percent rise in 2003 and a 19 percent rise in 2002.

A total of 14,703 reportable STD cases of chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis were recorded by MDH in 2004 compared to the 14,111 cases in 2003.

“This year’s increase is due solely to the increase in chlamydia,” said Dr. Harry Hull, state epidemiologist and director of the Division of Infectious Disease Epidemiology, Prevention and Control at MDH. “Chlamydia rates have doubled in our state since 1996.”

MDH data show that there were 11,601 chlamydia cases reported in 2004 compared to 10,714 cases in 2003, an 8 percent increase. Nearly seven out of every 10 cases occurred in teens and young adults. Rates remain elevated among communities of color and one out of three chlamydia cases occurred in Greater Minnesota.

“One of the reasons chlamydia is so wide spread is that three out of four women and one out of two men initially do not have any symptoms,” said Hull. Health officials noted that if symptoms do occur, they develop within one to three weeks after exposure. Early symptoms in women can include vaginal discharge or burning sensation during urination. Men may experience a milky discharge from the penis, pain during urination or swelling of the testicles.

“When left undetected and untreated, chlamydia can be dangerous,” Hull said. Untreated chlamydia can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease in women causing one in five to become infertile. Chlamydia can also be passed to newborns during childbirth causing blindness or pneumonia if not treated. Untreated chlamydia can also cause infertility in males.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that sexually active adolescent women and women in their early twenties be screened for chlamydia every year. Chlamydia can be spread through vaginal and anal sex and less frequently through oral sex. CDC advises that the use of latex condoms, when used consistently and correctly, can reduce the risk of getting chlamydia.

“The other STDs we closely monitor are gonorrhea and syphilis,” said Hull. “Although our overall gonorrhea and syphilis cases dropped slightly last year, we are still seeing higher infection rates among specific communities and geographical areas.”

MDH data shows that gonorrhea dropped 8 percent from 3,202 cases in 2003 to 2,957 cases in 2004. Teens and young adults account for nearly six out of every 10 cases and infection rates remain elevated among communities of color. About 84 percent of the gonorrhea cases occurred in the seven county metropolitan area.

“Although we have seen a slight drop in gonorrhea cases, we now have seen a five-fold increase in the number of antibiotic-resistant strains of gonorrhea since 2002,” said Hull. “We need to continue to alert our doctors and clinics about the situation so they can do the proper assessments and provide alternative antibiotics to assure that these cases get the appropriate treatment.”

Health officials noted that the majority of infections from antibiotic-resistant strains of gonorrhea have occurred among gay and bisexual men. Clinicians are advised to do sexual histories with their patients and to follow the CDC amended treatment guidelines for antibiotic-resistant strains of gonorrhea.

In 2004, there were 145 cases (all stages) of syphilis reported. Syphilis has remained concentrated among gay and bisexual men in the Minneapolis and St. Paul areas for the last three years. Eighty-one (81) percent of the early syphilis cases among males were gay and bisexual men. Thirty-two (32) percent of the early syphilis cases among gay and bisexual men were also infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Health officials warn that persons at increased risk of getting syphilis include those that meet their sexual partners primarily through the Internet. Other cases have been linked to meeting partners at bars, nightclubs and phone chat lines. Alcohol and methamphetamines have also been connected to some of the cases in the last couple of years. All of these situations may be associated with people who are more likely to engage in riskier or unprotected sex.

Gonorrhea and syphilis, like chlamydia, can be spread through unprotected oral, anal and vaginal sex. Once detected, these diseases can be treated and cured with antibiotics. If left untreated, gonorrhea can cause infertility. Untreated syphilis can lead to blindness, brain damage, heart problems and even death in men and women. Sexually transmitted diseases can also increase the risk of getting infected with HIV or spreading it to others due to increased inflammation or the presence of sores or blisters.

To combat the epidemic, the MDH Partner Services Program provides follow-up to both people with sexually transmitted diseases and their sexual partners who may need examination and treatment. In addition, MDH has supported chlamydia and gonorrhea screening efforts with eight clinics serving areas with the highest rates of infection.

The complete [STD Surveillance Report - 2004](#) and [STD fact sheets](#) can be found on the MDH Web site. The current [CDC treatment guidelines for STDs](#) are available online

Source: Minnesota Department of Health

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